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ABSTRACT

A study examined ways of improving the response rates of employers to followup surveys collecting information on graduates of community colleges in Florida. Followup study procedures and instruments that had been used in the state were modified to provide for greater faculty involvement in placement of students and identification of employers and to encourage greater employer contact and response. The new survey form was shortened to fit on one side of a regular letter-sized page. Although the state-mandated questions had to be retained verbatim, the form was changed by presenting the questions in larger print and with bolder subtitles. The cover letter was also improved in the following ways: information was presented in a straightforward manner, the simplicity and importance of completing the form were stressed, and the previous introductory rhetorical question was replaced by a positive statement. Although the results of using the new form and procedures were not dramatic (an improved response rate of 57.4 percent, they did represent a substantial improvement over the previous rate. Furthermore, the procedure of addressing letters "To the Supervisor of . . ." rather than restricting mailings to those supervisors whose names had been supplied by students added 104 employers to the survey population and resulted in 47 additional responses. (Appendixes to this report include copies of the previous and revised employer followup letters and cover letters.) (MN)

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FINAL REPORT

Project No. 052-15260-6-2G75

From 10/18/85 - 6/30/86

EMPLOYMENT PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

Brevard Community College

1519 Clearlake Road

Cocoa, Florida

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Project Director: Robert E. Lawton

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EPLOYMENT PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

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Abstract of the Final Report

Title of Project:	Employment Performance of Students
Organization:	Brevard Community College
Project Director:	Robert E. Lawton
Expenditures:	$3,542.00
Duration of Project:	October 18, 1985 - June 30, 1986

Problem:

Employer evaluations of graduates' performance is weak because too few employers respond to survey attempts to determine the strengths and weaknesses of graduates in job settings. This impedes the process of curriculum change and updating so that training may be more compatible with job requirements.

Ojectives:

The principal objective of this study was to determine some sensible and workable ways of administering follow-up surveys that would increase employer response rates. Specifically, the study aimed at effecting an improvement of at least 10% in the existing response rate of employers (percentage of those contacted who respond). Second, a 20% increase in the total number of employers providing information was sought. In other words, the study was designed to get both a higher proportion of those contacted to respond and to also increase the overall number of responses that could be obtained from the employer pool.

Procedures:

A pragmatic approach was used to used to attempt to achieve higher numbers and proportions of respondents. Follow-up study procedures that had been in effect for years were modified to provide for greater faculty involvement in placement of students and identification of employers; traditional survey procedures were also altered to encourage greater employer contact and response.

Results and Utilization:

The new procedures did increase the response rate as well as the total number of employers contacted and responding. Building upon the lessons learned in this project, continuation of the new methodology should produce further improvements in future years.

EMPLOYMENT PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

In compliance with FS 229.558(e) the Office of Educational Research and Planning conducts an annual survey of the employers of both the completers and leavers identified through the follow-up process who were working in a field related to their program of study at Brevard Community College (BCC). A completer is one who "...finished a planned sequence of courses, services, or activities designed to meet either an occupational objective and obtained entry level job skills or a program designed for transfer (university parallel)" [Community College Management Information System Procedures Manual (CCMIS), 1980, p. 14.5]. A leaver is a former student "...who did not complete the program and did not return to enroll in the institution for two consecutive semesters or who notified the institution of intent not to enroll again" (CCMIS, 1980, p. 16.3). Follow-up studies collect data that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and to provide administrators with information for better institutional planning. Successful programs can be used as models; unsuccessful programs can be reviewed to locate their deficient areas. These results are indicators useful in decision making relating to the addition, retention, and deletion of programs.

The response rate for the 1982-83 employer follow-up survey was 45.2%; for 1983-84 this figure was 42.3%. The response rate must be increased to provide a valid evaluation of each program. A high rate of response gives more credibility to a survey (Lockhart, 1984, p. 5). Many variables can affect this response rate. Some of these factors are the survey instrument, the cover letter and the current procedures. All of these areas will be investigated.

METHODOLOGY

Before beginning the employer follow-up, a potential pool of employers is derived from the responses to the completer/leaver follow-up surveys, the accountability forms, and the feedback reports. Information concerning program completers and leavers from the previous academic year is obtained through mailed surveys and telephone contacts. Accountability forms containing employment information of former students are submitted by instructors each term. The feedback report is provided by the State Board of Community Colleges (SBCC). Social Security numbers of former students are matched with those on file at the Department of Commerce to identify a student's place of employment. The employers of each student determined to be working in a related field are contacted by mail.

The survey instrument itself may be responsible for the level of the response rate. "The appearance and arrangement of the survey form is vital to a successful survey" (Berdie, 1974, p. 31). Often, the visual effect determines if a questionnaire is read or discarded. The current form (see Appendix A) is visually attractive with the title in bold print on the front page. It has been compressed to fit both sides of letter-sized paper and is folded in half like a book. This is equivalent to three typewritten pages.

Another variable affecting the response rate is the cover letter. A favorable first impression is important. Cover letters should be short and of high quality. They should explain the reason for the survey and tell why the recipient has been chosen to respond (Berdie, 1974, p. 59). If a respondent feels his participation is essential to the survey, he is more likely to complete the questionnaire. BCC's current cover letter follows most of these rules (see Appendix B).

Previously, a form was mailed only if the student supplied employment information and a supervisor's name. Therefore many possible respondents were not contacted. To correct these problems, several new procedures were implemented. The new survey instrument (see Appendix C) has been shortened to fit on one side of

regular letter-size paper. Although the state-mandated questions are required to be listed verbatim, the larger print and bolder subtitles produced a form that is more pleasing to the reader. The new format corrected many of the shortcomings of the original document.

The cover letter (see Appendix D) was also improved. The letter was changed to stress our needs and to point out the simplicity of completing the new form. Information was presented in a straight-forward manner; the introductory rhetorical question was eliminated and a more positive approach was used. As in the past, all letters were personally signed by the Director of Educational Research and Planning.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

An evaluation of current procedures indicated that it was necessary to increase the contact with the employer pool. Although the place of employment was known for numerous students, the supervisor's name was not available. Formerly, these employers were not included on the mailing list. As a solution to the problem, letters were addressed to "Supervisor of (student's name)." Many employers were contacted in this manner.

CONCLUSION

The results were not dramatic, but we believe changes were directly responsible for an improved response rate of 57.4% (see number 1). The response rate for these less personalized letters was 45.2% (see number 2). Although this brought the overall response rate down to 54.0% (see number 3), we received 47 responses that we would have missed using the traditional method. With these 47 added to the original group, we have both the largest number of employer responses and the highest employer response rate achieved to date:

TABLE 1

1.	First mailing	Sent: 242 Returned: 140 Response Rate: 57.9%
2.	Mailing to "supervisor of"	Sent: 104 Returned: 47 Response Rate: 45.2%
3.	Overall	Total Sent: 346 Total Returned: 187 Response Rate: 54.0%

All of these new procedures contributed to the increased response rate. The brief format of the new survey instrument facilitated its completion by the employers. The cover letter stressed the importance of the employer's involvement in the study and emphasized the relatively small amount of time necessary to accomplish this task. The additional 47 employers contacted through the "Supervisor of" letters were partially responsible for the increase in the number and rate of response. Continuation of this methodology in conjunction with a second mailing should produce an even higher rate of response next year.

REFERENCES

Berdie, Douglas R., and John F. Anderson. Questionnaires: Design and Use. Metuchen, New Jersey: 1974.

Community College Management Information System Procedures Manual. Tallahassee: Division of Community Colleges. 1980.

Lockhart, Daniel C. ed. Making Effective Use of Mailed Questionnaires. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc. 1984.

APPENDICES

BREVARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
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BOARD OF TRUSTEES
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Brevard Community College is committed to a policy of non-discrimination in the provision of equal opportunity and equal access in student services, programs, and student employment, and in faculty and staff employment and advancement without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, political affiliation, handicap, veteran status or marital status.

EMPLOYER FOLLOW-UP FORM

1. Does this position held by this BCC former student/graduate require:

Associate Degree	Certificate
☐ Yes	☐ Yes
☐ No	☐ No
☐ Not required but preferred	☐ Not required but preferred

2. Do you employ other two-year college former students/graduates?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not know

If yes, please compare to BCC former students/graduates _____

_____

3. If an employee in your organization earned an Associate Degree or Certificate would he/she:

	never	unlikely	sometimes	usually	always
a. Have increased chances of being promoted.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Be expected to assume greater responsibilities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Be expected to perform job tasks requiring a high level of skills.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

VOCATIONAL TRAINING EVALUATION

4. Please rate the BCC vocational training received by the individual in the following areas:

	very good	good	average	poor	very poor
a. Technical knowledge	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Work attitude	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Work quality	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)

OVERALL RATING

5. What is your overall rating of the BCC vocational training received by this individual as it relates to the requirements of his or her job?

☐ Very Good (5) ☐ Good (4) ☐ Average (3) ☐ Poor (2) ☐ Very Poor (1)

RELATIVE PREPARATION

6. As a result of this person's BCC vocational training, how would you rate his or her preparation in relation to other employees in his or her work group who did not receive such training?

☐ No basis for comparison

☐ Individual is better prepared (5)

☐ Both are about the same (3)

☐ Individual is less prepared (1)

7. If and when the need arises, I would be willing to hire additional employees who complete the same or similar vocational programs.

☐ Yes ☐ No

GENERAL INFORMATION

8. What, in your opinion, is the job outlook for program graduates of this particular occupational field?

☐ Very Good (5) ☐ Good (4) ☐ Poor (3)

9. Please specify any additional skills that you feel an Associate Degree or Certificate program graduate you employ should have:

10. Please describe any weak skill or technical area that should be strengthened by the College:

11. If further evaluation of college programs is needed, would you be willing to share your expertise and be contacted by our faculty?

☐ Yes ☐ No

12. Please feel free to add any additional comments:

Please return the questionnaire in the enclosed postage paid envelope.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

Cocoa Campus

May 13, 1985

Dear :

As an employer, have you ever wished your new employees were better trained? People who understand your requirements and have been given the appropriate preparatory experiences are the kind of graduates we at Brevard Community College are anxious to produce. To do this, and to keep our graduates abreast of changing technology and job requirements, you are the most important source of essential information.

We would very much appreciate your assessment of how well we have prepared any BCC graduate/former student you have hired. Do not hesitate to be critical; we will get busy to change and improve our programs if you will help identify BCC failings as well as strengths.

Would you take a few minutes to complete the enclosed questionnaire in relation to the preparation received by and return it in the stamped, self-addressed envelope? By doing so, you will be helping to build a resource of fully qualified candidates to meet your needs.

Many thanks in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Lawton, Director
Educational Research and Planning

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Enclosures

BREVARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Reporting Period: 1984-85

EMPLOYER FOLLOW-UP FORM

VOCATIONAL TRAINING EVALUATION

1. Please rate the BCC vocational training received by the individual in the following areas:

	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
a. Technical knowledge	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Work attitude	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Work quality	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)

OVERALL RATING

2. What is your overall rating of the BCC vocational training received by this individual as it relates to the requirements of his or her job?

☐ Very Good (5) ☐ Good (4) ☐ Average (3) ☐ Poor (2) ☐ Very Poor (1)

RELATIVE PREPARATION

3. As a result of this person's BCC vocational training, how would you rate his or her preparation in relation to other employees in his or her work group who did not receive such training?

☐ No basis for comparison
☐ Individual is better prepared (5)
☐ Both are about the same (3)
☐ Individual is less prepared (1)

4. If and when the need arises, I would be willing to hire additional employees who complete the same or similar vocational programs.

☐ Yes ☐ No

GENERAL INFORMATION

5. What, do you believe, is the job outlook for program graduates of this particular occupational field

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
a. on a state or national level?	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. with your company?	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. Please describe any particularly strong or weak educational activities that you believe exist in this College program.

_____

_____

7. As needs arise, would you be willing to serve in an advisory capacity to strengthen this College program?

☐ Yes ☐ No

8. Please feel free to add any additional comments on the back of this form.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

May 13, 1986

V1

Dear V2:

As an employer of former students or graduates of Brevard Community College, you have a right to expect the best. BCC wants to understand your requirements and design the most appropriate preparatory experiences for our students. We need to keep abreast of changing technology and procedures. You are our most important source of this essential information.

We appreciate constructive criticism and will get busy to change and improve our programs if you will help identify BCC failings as well as strengths.

Please take a few brief moments to complete the single-page enclosed questionnaire in relation to the preparation received by V3 and return it in the stamped, self-addressed envelope. By doing so, you will be helping to build a resource of fully qualified candidates to meet your future needs.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Lawton, Director
Educational Research and Planning

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Enclosure